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ABSTRACT

Meaningful and useful evaluations of teaching and teachers must not only identify and define all the mitigating contexts, but must also account for their influences, both constructive and negative. Among the contextual factors that need to be considered in planning teacher evaluations are: student characteristics; goals, objectives and curriculum mandates; inservice opportunities and human support services; materials, media, and facilities; and organizational structures and processes. The influences of leadership, decision-making power, and the climate of professional worth must also be defined. The major purpose of teacher evaluation is assumed to be improvement of instruction to provide students with the broadest possible range of knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors. The context for this purpose includes characteristics of the community and their effect on a teacher's ability to demonstrate proficiency. (Author/CM)

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CONTEXT EFFECTS IN TEACHER EVALUATION

(Paper Presentation to the American Educational Research
Association Annual Meeting, Montreal, Canada, 15 April 1983)

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If evaluation of teaching and teachers is to serve meaningful and useful purposes, it must not only identify and define all the mitigating contexts but must also take into account their influences, both constructive and negative, in determining success. This paper discusses the individual contextual factors that need to be considered in planning for the evaluation of teaching and teachers: student characteristics; goals, objectives, and curriculum mandates; inservice opportunities and human support services; time and numbers of students; materials, media, and facilities; organizational structures and processes; leadership and supervisory skills; decision-making power; climate of professional worth and contribution; working conditions, human services, and security benefits; and community characteristics, priorities for schooling, and financial ability, effort, and resources.

SOME UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

To discuss context as it applies to teacher evaluation in any definitive manner, the author's concept of the purpose of evaluation needs to be clear and his definition of learning articulated. For this discussion, the major purpose of teacher evaluation is assumed to be the improvement of instruction. As an extrapolation of that assumption, the improvement of instruction should be expected to improve learning. Learning is defined as the broadest possible range of knowledges, skills, attitudes, and behaviors contained in all those goals of schooling that have been identified, and agreed to any place in the society: skills in language arts (as that term is broadly defined to include reading, writing, speaking, listening, and forms of nonverbal communication); mathematics; knowledge in the cultural heritage (the social studies broadly conceived); a broad liberal education in the arts, sciences, and humanities; vocational competencies; interpersonal and citizenship behaviors; self-concept; and whatever other goals are selected for schooling, whether education about consumer affairs, sex, the ecology, health, safety, drug use, and a myriad of others.

Learning as defined here also takes into account the person in the process. Thus, evaluation must embrace what teaching and teachers do to make the years spent in schooling as full-living, wholesome, democratic, and fulfilling as can be conceived, to a substantial degree independent of cognitive learning outcomes.

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THE CONTEXTUAL FACTORS IN PERSPECTIVE

Student Characteristics

The most significant contextual factor affecting teachers' success is the characteristics of the student body with which teachers must deal each day. It would appear unnecessary to state that students bring to school widely differing levels of achievement, interests, motivations, and attitudes. It would be unnecessary were it not that this important condition is so frequently overlooked. When students of differing backgrounds, in differing mixes, are placed in an instructional setting, the potential for varying degrees of success of different teachers with differing student groups is almost infinite.

Glass (1973) has noted that "nothing short of random assignment of pupil to teachers as an ironclad administrative necessity would ensure that the teachers were in a fair race to produce pupil gain" (p. 54). Since both the technical and practical potential for assigning to teachers groups of student whose collective characteristics are identical (or nearly identical) is low, then any teacher evaluation system, to reflect accuracy and fairness, must take into account the characteristics of the students who arrive at a teacher's door each day for instruction--characteristics over which those who teach have little or no control.

Goals, Objectives, and Curriculum Mandates

Evaluation of the success of an enterprise is or ought to be, based on how nearly the expressed goals and objectives of that enterprise are achieved. At the same time that contemporary rhetoric (and in some places legislative and other policy mandates in the United States) are narrowing the school's goals and objectives to those that promote only learning in the basic skills and a few limited cognitive knowledges and understandings, other goals and mandates emerge that broaden the objectives schools and teachers are expected to accomplish, ~~that~~ to an overwhelming array. For example, New Jersey mandated in 1980 that by 1983 all schools will be required to teach sex education to all students. In recent and not-so-recent times, one after another of such objectives has been assigned to schools and teachers. Driver education was mandated in many places in the U.S. decades ago, followed by first-aid and civil defense. In more recent years, goals and objectives have come to embrace consumer education, drug use, parenting, the ecology, energy conservation, mainstreaming the handicapped, and on and on.

Evaluation of the performance of teachers must, of necessity, take into account the full range of professional responsibilities mandated and the opportunities provided for discharging those responsibilities. Teacher evaluation must respond to the question, Just how omniscapable should an individual teacher be expected to become in managing this increasing array of goals and objectives? Answers to this question are particularly crucial for those teachers who preside over classrooms where being equally enthusiastic and proficient in teaching the traditional branches of the curriculum--language arts, mathematics, science, social studies--is expected, in addition to achieving all the other objectives that have been added over the years and that continue to accumulate.

Teacher evaluation must also take into account the clarity with which goals and objectives are articulated, the degree of agreement on them, and the number of objectives mandated in terms of their manageability. Sometimes goals and objectives are not clearly defined and thus not fully understood by those who have the responsibility for accomplishing them. And, frequently, goals and objectives have not achieved the consensus of their governing bodies or implementers.

Professional Development

For each different goal and objective mandated for instruction, a modicum of expertise in either subject matter or instructional strategies (often both) is expected or required. Evaluation of teaching must take into account the opportunities that teachers have to learn to know and do what they are expected to know and do. Frequently, teachers do not have the opportunity, either in their preservice education or in renewal programs once they have entered service, to become secure enough in the substance and/or process of new requirements to assure that new goals and objectives will be adequately achieved.

A current prime example of the need for such opportunities is in Public Law 94-142, which requires, to a large extent, mainstreaming the handicapped into regular classrooms. Many teachers have not had opportunities to learn the special skills required to work effectively with students who come to them possessing a broad range of exceptionalities. They are, therefore, in a poor position to demonstrate proficiency and to achieve success with such students.

Human Support Services

Specialization within the professions and within almost all other occupations has become a way of life in the society. As the goals and objectives of schooling have proliferated, as the knowledge explosion in the disciplines has intensified, and as understanding about human growth and development and how humans learn has increased, a need has arisen for a great range of special expertise to support and extend the teaching function.

Student characteristics also appear to have changed or to have become more diversified--for example, bilingual, multicultural and multiethnic, assertive, independent (or at least recognized to be so)--and call for a broader range of professional understanding of a cultural, sociological, and psychological nature. Part of the diversification is doubtless a result of the school's arriving at a situation in which larger and larger percentages of students are in school over a longer time (approximately 75% in 1978 stayed to secondary school graduation compared to only 48% 35 years ago). Other factors requiring the expertise of specialists are the changes in today's students in terms of social, ethical, and sexual mores, differences in the kinds of home and family support systems for youth, and the effects of mass media and other technological developments on the ways in which students view their world and respond to it.

All these factors require that to accomplish the increased range of goals and objectives, a variety of human support services--social, psychological, medical, and others--need to be at the command of teachers. Evaluation of teacher performance that does not take in account the availability, sufficiency, and efficiency of such may attribute less than success to teachers when the deficiencies are in other human services.

Time and Numbers of Students

Over a long period it has been suggested by some that if teachers had "time enough and few enough," a preponderance of the serious problems of schooling would be greatly diminished. This is more than a platitude, and there is increasing evidence that the admonition needs to be taken with great seriousness.

Time. Long ago the title of a monograph of the National Education Association recommended "Time to Teach." In the 1950s the Bay City Teacher Aide studies showed that large percentages of teachers' time (up to 40% or more) was spent in noninstructional activities, many of them clerical or manual, which contributed little or nothing to promoting student learning. More recent findings notably those of the Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study and the work of Wiley and Harnischfeger (1975), confirm that more "time on task," particularly in the basic-skills areas, results in increased learning--at least as learning is assessed by cognitive measures. There is also evidence from a variety of sources that too little time is available in relation to the large number of goals and objectives mandated for schooling. Of that available, much time continues to be consumed by required noninstructional activities, interruptions, getting ready to work, cleaning up, and the like.

In terms of total time available, some studies have shown that, with the number of subjects to be taught and other mandated responsibilities to be discharged, the typical teacher with the typical number of students in an elementary self-contained classroom would have no more than a couple of minutes every day to work with an individual student on a learning activity such as arithmetic.

With no increased time allotted for schooling in most places, and with the increased array of responsibilities that have been mandated to the schools, there must be less time for each. It then follows that, if time is a significant contributor to promoting important goals and objectives of learning, the ability of teachers to contribute at the highest level of to achieving those goals and objectives should be considered in the light of whether there is time enough. Since time available varies widely within as well as among institutional settings, this variation needs to be taken into account as teachers are evaluated.

Numbers of Students. The controversy that has continued over many decades as to whether smaller classes contribute to improved instruction and student learning is well-known and amply documented, although not always accurately. In spite of the fact that carefully controlled studies in the 1950s showed "smaller is better" for a variety of instructional activities, these findings were either ignored, distorted,

or discredited for political or other reasons. Two recent analyses by Glass and Smith (notes 1 and 2) of a large number of studies, both of the educational process and student learning outcomes at elementary and secondary levels, clearly and persuasively confirm what earlier studies showed: Smaller classes are conducive to promoting a broad range of educational purposes. Advantages accrue the most when class sizes are well below 20.

A large proportion of teachers in the elementary and secondary schools of the United States work with classes that run well above 20. In the large cities, where student learning problems are considered the most severe, classes tend to be the largest.

From the most recent, definitive findings it seems clear that one important determinant of success in teaching is the number of students that teachers must deal with each day. Therefore, the evaluation of teaching and teachers must take into account the numbers of students assigned to each teacher.

Materials, Media, and Facilities

In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that different instructional objectives require different kinds of print and nonprint stimuli. Yet stories abound of classrooms in poorer school systems, or poorer neighborhoods within systems, that lack such basic materials as up-to-date textbooks or enough books for all student, let alone a variety of other print materials, films, laboratory equipment for experimentation, raw materials for crafts, and the like. One need only visit classrooms in different school systems or within systems to be aware of the disparity among them in the availability of material, media, and the suitability of facilities.

Although provisions for software and hardware alone may not be major determinants of whether teachers are able to accomplish the goals and objectives of the schools, they certainly affect goal achievement. Therefore, teacher evaluation needs to be conducted in the context of the availability, quality, and appropriateness of the physical conditions, equipment, and materials provided to the instructional setting.

Organizational Structure and Process of the School

How the school is organized and arrangements for how instructional processes are to be conducted represent a significant contextual climate which needs to be taken into account in judging the success of teaching and teachers. Structures that affect teachers' potential for success include the organization of schools by grades or levels, how the services of specialist personnel are provided (e.g., do they work with teachers to help them better serve students, or do they work directly with students, or both?), and accounting and reporting systems and procedures.

The organization for administering individual school units as well as some aspects of the arrangements for instruction within classrooms are frequently mandated by authorities outside the classroom. Even the

materials provided sometimes dictate classroom organization. For example, a decision by a curriculum director or department chairperson that a particular instructional system will be used in all classrooms mandates an arrangement for instruction from which a teacher may not veer but which may not be compatible with a teacher's specific objectives or teaching style.

In a recent field study of the effects of class size (Filbey et al., Note 3), teachers reported that when class sizes were reduced, among those things that deterred them from making the most of this increased potential for improving instruction and learning were mandated curriculum series, fixed daily schedules, and emphasis by the school principal on orderliness, quiet, and written work (so students would "always have something they are supposed to be doing").

The ecological theory of teaching pioneered at the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development in San Francisco (note 4) has identified two constructs for studying teaching that take into account structure within the classroom, activity structure and participation structure. Activity structure is represented by the rules and routines within the classroom that govern how the work activities are controlled and carried out, for example, grouping for readiness or lining up to get art supplies. Participation structure is defined as the way students respond to rules and routines and are involved in carrying them out and the interactions that take place between teacher and students and among students in the conduct of work activities. Sometimes these two structures are established and controlled by the classroom teacher. Sometimes they are not. Their effects on teaching and teacher performance under both conditions must be taken into account as teachers are evaluated.

School Leadership and Evaluation Skills of Supervisors

Leadership is receiving renewed attention as a key focus for influencing change that will lead to school improvement. Recent examples of this are in the findings of Goodlad (1979) and the Carnegie study on the relationship between secondary education and higher education. Among other things, these studies point to the significant role of leadership at the building level in implementing programs and activities that promote innovation and curricular improvement. Teacher evaluation needs to take into account the quality of leadership teachers are provided for accomplishing the goals and objectives of the schools.

If leadership roles at the building level are important for innovation and improvement, they are also crucial in evaluating teaching and teachers for at least two other reasons. First, it is the principal (or his/her representative) who makes, or whose recommendations are a major basis for making, decisions and who takes actions as a result of evaluation activities.

Principals and others who carry out evaluation activities and make, or largely influence, the decisions based on such activities should have: intense preparation in evaluation theory and process; the commitment to make it a priority; the attitude to make it fair and objective;

and the time and resources to discharge the responsibility in a creditable manner.

In sum, evaluation of teachers must take into account the important contextual elements related to those who evaluate: the preparedness; the willingness; and the opportunity to conduct this complex activity at the highest level of proficiency and make the wisest, fairest, and most constructive judgments possible based on the findings.

Decision-Making Power of Teachers

Professionals are ostensibly labelled as such and licensed in particular professions because they possess high levels of expertise as certified by licensing authorities and degree-granting institutions. One unique characteristic of senior professions is that they have the leeway to exercise a high level of professional judgment. In this respect there is a distinct difference between the control of education and the exercise of professional authority and judgment. The control of education is, and rightly so, within the purview of the duly elected or otherwise delegated governing bodies. This authority includes determining the broad goals, allocating resources for schooling, and organizing and managing the schools. On the other hand, the authority for exercising the appropriate professional expertise and judgment for accomplishing particular instructional purposes with students of particular backgrounds and needs ought to be mainly within the purview of the professional teacher..

When they have decision-making power, teachers are in the best position to select the most appropriate ways of organizing classrooms, selecting among instructional strategies and materials, and conducting processes for evaluating student learning progress. When such power is absent, teachers who work most closely with students are often unable to adjust instructional programs to meet individual needs of which only the teacher may be aware. This is particularly true when the power to make decisions about instructional matters is removed from classrooms to central office headquarters, or when mandates on what and how to teach come from such remote sources as local and state school boards, state education departments, and state legislatures.

Teacher evaluation must take into account the leeway provided teachers to make decisions, based on their professional expertise in (1) developing specific objectives based on the broader goals set by the citizenry, (2) selecting instructional strategies and materials, and (3) selecting, applying, and interpreting programs and processes for evaluating student learning progress.

Climate of Professional Worth and Contribution

A contextual factor in teaching that is more felt than observed is increasingly referred to as "efficacy," the sense of success. Recent studies of teacher stress and teacher "burn-out" have turned attention to the effect of a sense of success on success itself. It appears from research to date that efficacy can be an important contributor to success. Although all the factors that contribute to a sense of

efficacy have not been identified, one implication of recent studies is that the institutions that employ teachers need in some way to create an organizational climate that causes professionals to sense that what they do is important, valued, and respected. In addition, the institutions need to recognize and publicly acclaim successful acts, which acclamation tends to lead to more successful acts.

Teaching success, then, depends at least in part on how successful the teacher sees himself/herself. This, in turn, depends to a considerable degree on how the employing institution recognizes, supports, and applauds success. Teacher evaluation should take into account the institution's commitment to and behavior in creating a climate that is conducive to a high degree of efficacy among its professional staff.

Working Conditions, Human Services, and Security Benefits

Like students who may be in a poor frame of mind to learn if they begin the school day without breakfast and in uncomfortable classrooms, teachers who arrive at school insecure about health protection and financial security for their families and who must work in poorly lighted, poorly ventilated, cramped conditions are in a poor condition to demonstrate their highest levels of proficiency. A sense of security about health, financial welfare, and preparation for the future are essential for optimum functioning in all occupations. Since the basic material rewards (salaries) of teachers do not compare well to other professions and are also low compared to some other occupations with fewer requirements for preparation, the human service and security benefits become even more significant to teachers.

The idea of teaching as a missionary occupation, if it ever did have any validity, is no longer a viable rationale for expecting teachers to accept a lower standard of living and less security for the future than other segments of the population. Expectations for high motivation, mental state, and proficiency among teachers to conduct the best professional practice known must take into account what the system does to alleviate personal insecurities and to provide pleasant and conducive working conditions.

Community Characteristics, Priorities for Schooling, and Financial Ability, Effort, and Resources

Over the long term it has been, and continues to be, the local social order that has created and sustained the kinds of schools characteristic of various communities within the society. It is in this sense that community characteristics are viewed here as importantly influencing much of what the school is and does, including the performance of teachers.

Over a long period, relationships have been drawn between the characteristics of a community's citizenry and the kind (quality) of schools it maintains. Higher educational levels, greater percentages of professionals, and higher income levels in a population have all typically been accompanied by "better" schools, whether better is measured

by more preparation of the school staffs, more adequate facilities and equipment, more innovative instructional processes, or greater achievement of the students.

Such characteristics as more education among the populace, not surprisingly, tend to be accompanied by greater community wealth (as measured by property values), which, in turn, is accompanied by a higher priority given to education among other services a community provides. The higher priority is then reflected in greater financial effort and, consequently higher expenditure per student for schooling.

The higher expenditure per student "purchases" more teachers for a given number of students. It purchases teachers who are likely to have more preparation, more professional-development opportunities, more planning time, and few enough students to employ the best known instructional strategies for diagnosing individual learning problems and providing individualized remediation for solving the problems.

A pedagogical sage of the middle half of this century has used the analog of the steam engine to describe this phenomenon. The late Paul Mort of Columbia University concluded from long years of research on the relationship of cost to quality in education that many communities do not provide enough resources for schools "to get the water warm in the boiler" let alone to generate enough steam to produce education of quality.

The potential for success of teachers is directly linked to the characteristics of the total community in which they function and needs to be taken into account as teacher evaluation plans are developed.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Teacher evaluation, it has been argued here, must be considered in the context of community characteristics, resources, and effort for schooling, in the context of the total school system climate and organizational arrangements, in the context of the ways in which the school unit and its leadership function, in the context of time, human, and material resources and autonomy provided the classroom teacher, and in the context of the characteristics of the students themselves. Unless all of these factors are considered as mediators in judging the performance of teachers, whatever judgments (favorable or unfavorable) are made may be attributed to teachers when the compelling forces underlying teacher performance reside in places quite apart from the transactions that take place between teacher and student.

Context for the purpose of this discussion was conceived in the broadest sense to include characteristics of the community and their effect on teachers' ability to demonstrate proficiency. The decision to consider context broadly is based, in part, on a philosophical bent of this writer related to the query of George S. Counts a half century ago about whether the schools could create a new social order. The suggestion by Counts that the schools might make such a large impact on human behavior that the social order would be largely altered as a

result has not fully materialized. And it is questionable whether it is practicable to conceive the school's role so broadly. On the other hand, if one has much faith in the power of education one must believe that as humans become better educated they will eventually make better decisions and larger contributions to the improvement of the social order.

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